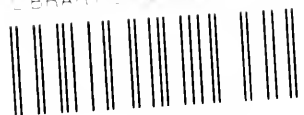


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Museum Bulletin No. 2

ANTHROPOLOGICAL SERIES, No. 2

JUNE 22, 1914

SOME ASPECTS OF PUBERTY FASTING AMONG THE OJIBWA

by

Paul Radin

Reprint from
Museum Bulletin No. 2,
same pagination.

OTTAWA
GOVERNMENT PRINTING BUREAU
1914

No 1342

Monograph

E 99
C6 R125

June 22nd, 1914.

Canada
Geological Survey
Museum Bulletin No. 2.
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IV.—Some Aspects of Puberty Fasting Among the Ojibwa.¹

By PAUL RADIN.

INTRODUCTION.

The subject of fasting among the North American Indians, although it has been touched upon frequently by a number of writers, has never been made the object of a special study as yet. In the present little essay the writer will make no attempt to study the subject of fasting in any exhaustive manner, but will merely attempt, on the basis of a number of some of the fasting experiences, to point out features that, in his opinion, seem distinctive of Ojibwa puberty fasts. He hopes to reserve a more exhaustive study of the same for his report on the ethnology of this tribe itself.

The fasting experiences will be given first and the discussion will then follow. The writer has only selected a few of the accounts he has obtained, but the five chosen seem to contain all the characteristic features of the fast, although in certain details they, of course, differ from some of the others.

It might be stated, before proceeding to give the accounts themselves, that in only two cases did the experience represent that of the informant himself, and that in the other cases they referred to relatives of the informants. I do not believe that this in any way detracts from their value, but, of course, it may have led to the omission of a detail here and there.

¹The following article is based entirely on notes collected by the writer among the Ojibwa of eastern and southeastern Ontario during the spring and summer of 1912, for the Geological Survey of Canada.

FASTING EXPERIENCE (A).

I was about ten years old when I fasted. That is the age at which our grandparents generally desired us to fast. My parents, themselves, seemed to care very little whether I did or did not fast, and I imagine that had it not been for my grandmother, I never would have done so.

It was at about the middle of what we call the "little-bear" month that my grandmother came to visit us. When she was about to return to her home, she had me accompany her. I did not know at the time what she wanted and it was only on the morning of the next day that she told me that I was to fast. Two mornings after that I received very little to eat and drink at breakfast time. At noon I received nothing at all. For the evening meal she gave me a very small piece of bread. In addition to myself there were six other boys fasting at the same time. During the daytime we would play together, keeping a close watch on one another, lest someone try secretly to get something to eat.

We were to fast ten days, all in all. At the end of the fifth day, however, I became so hungry that after my grandparents had gone to bed, I got up and helped myself to a hearty meal. They discovered it, however, the next morning and I had to begin my fast all over again. This time I was very careful not to break my fast, for I did not want to begin over again, as on the first occasion.

At the end of the tenth day, my grandparents built me a wigwam. It was supported on four poles, about three or four feet from the ground, and I was to use it for sleeping. My little wigwam was situated at some distance from the lodge of my grandparents, directly under an oak tree. I do not know whether in olden times it was customary to build the fasting wigwam under just this tree or not. My impression is that the old people built it at some distance from their own lodge, but not too far to prevent them from watching its occupant during the day time.

My grandmother told me not to accept the blessings of every "spirit" that would appear to me in my "dreams," for there

were many bad spirits around and they would doubtless try to deceive me and thus cause misfortunes. The first four nights, I slept soundly and dreamt of nothing whatsoever. The fifth night, however, I dreamt that a very large and beautiful bird came to me and promised me many great things. I had, however, made up my mind not to accept the blessing of the first spirit that appeared, so I refused all that had been offered, and as I watched the bird disappear, I saw that it turned into a chickadee. In the morning, when my grandmother came to ask me whether anyone had blessed me, I told her that a chickadee had offered me many gifts, but that I had rejected them. Then she told me that the chickadee often fooled people in this manner. For a few nights after that I again did not dream of anything, but during the eighth night another big bird came to me. I was getting tired of staying in the little wigwam so long, so I decided to accept whatever he would offer. I dreamt that this big bird took me along with him to the north, where there was only ice. There I saw many more birds just like him, some of them very old. These birds offered me long life and freedom from sickness. Indeed it was quite different from what the chickadee had promised. I accepted all that they gave me and then the bird that had brought me there took me to my wigwam again. When he left he told me to watch him before he got out of sight, and as I did, I noticed that it was a white loon. In the morning, when my grandmother came to question me about my dreams, I told her of my experience with the white loons. She was very glad to hear about it, for they had rarely been blessed by white loons. From that time they called me *Wābimā* or White-loon.

FASTING EXPERIENCE (B).

When I was a boy of eleven years old, I was told by my mother that it was about time for me to find out something concerning my future life and this I was to do by fasting. I was at first not to eat or drink anything for five days except at supper. The sixth day they built a little wigwam for me alongside of a little creek running through the woods and left me there over

night. The next morning my mother came and asked me of what I had dreamt. As a matter of fact I had not slept at all that night, for I went to the creek to get a drink. However, as this was early in autumn, the nights were quite warm; she noticed my tracks near the creek and immediately suspected that I had left my wigwam. She asked me where I had been and I admitted that I had been to the creek for some water. She told me to go home, and I had to start all over again, about two weeks from that time. This time another lad fasted together with me. After four days my parents built me a wigwam in a part of the woods far away from the water. I went to this place on the evening of the fourth day. The other boy accompanied me. That same night this other boy had a bad dream, and when our mothers came to see us the next day, we told his mother that he had dreamt of being bitten by a snake, that the snake had then made him sick, and that he had finally died. After telling of this dream, he was told to go home and I remained in the wigwam all alone. My parents visited me quite frequently, about four times a day. For five days I stayed there all alone and it was only on the fifth night that I had my dream. It was as follows:—

I dreamt that I was alongside of a lake and that I had had nothing to eat for some time. As I was wandering about in search of food, I came upon a large bird (*moñ*). This bird came over to where I was and spoke to me, saying that I was lost and that a party was out searching for me, but that they desired not to rescue but to shoot me. Then the bird flew away to a lake and brought me a fish to eat. He then told me that I would have good luck in hunting and in fishing and that I would live to a good old age. He also told me that I would never be shot by a shot-gun or a rifle, for the bird of whom I dreamt belonged to a species that a man rarely finds a chance to shoot. From that time on the *moñ* was my (personal) manito.

FASTING EXPERIENCE (C).

When I was ten years old my grandmother wanted me to fast, so that I might know what blessing I was to receive. I was to start in the autumn of the year. At first I was to get just a

little to eat and drink in the morning and the evening. This meagre diet was to continue all through the autumn and winter. In the spring a little wigwam was built for me on a scaffold, not very far from the ground. In this wigwam I was to stay ten days and nights, and only get a little to eat in the mornings and evenings. My grandmother told me before entering not to believe every spirit that would come to me with promises, for there are some who try to deceive people, and only to accept the blessings of that spirit who came with a great noise and power.

The first and second night I did not dream of anything, but during the third night a very rich man came to me and asked me to go along with him and said that he would give me all the riches I wanted. I went along with him but I did not accept what he offered me and returned to my wigwam. Then I looked in the direction in which the man who had appeared to me was disappearing, as he had bidden me, and I saw that he had changed into an owl and that the big lodge I had visited with him was a hollow tree with holes. The next night another rich man came to me, dressed in a suit of red material. He offered me the same things as the first man, and in addition told me that if I accepted his blessings I could change my clothes twice a year. After I refused, he told me to look in his direction as he left me, and as I did so, I saw nothing but oak trees and dry and green leaves. The next night another man came and offered me boxes of sugar. I went with him, too, but I refused his blessing, and when I turned to look at him as he left, just as I had done in the other cases, I only saw a large maple-tree.

My grandmother came twice a day to ask me about what I had dreamt and to give me something to eat. I told her about my dreams and she again told me to accept the blessing of no one but the spirit who came to me with a great noise and strength. Some night before the tenth I heard the noise of a gush of wind above me and saw a very stout and strong man. With this man I went towards the north and finally came to nine old men sitting around in a circle. In the centre sat a very old man and this was the man who blessed me. He told me that he had just been sent down from above. Then I was brought back to my little wigwam and told to look in the direction in which my

guide was going. When he had gone some distance, I looked and I saw a number of large white stones in a circle and one in the centre of this circle. The next morning when my grandmother came to me to feed me and question me, I told her of what I had dreamt. That was the end of my fasting.

Some people are fooled, during their fast, by a bird called the chickadee.

FASTING EXPERIENCE (D).

When an Indian is about to fast, he gets up early in the morning, gets his charcoal ready, and marks his cheeks. In the evening, when he returns, he washes his face and eats very little. He does the same thing for two days. Then he breaks his fast for two days. After that he begins his real fast. For six days he marks his face with charcoal. After the expiration of these six days he breaks his fast again for from five to six days. After that his parents build him a little wigwam about fifty rods from their lodge and there he is supposed to remain ten days. He knows that it is here that he will see his manito and that the animal (spirit) will bless him.

While the faster is in this little wigwam, the people get a very fast runner near him. When the morning of the tenth day arrives, the fire is made and the faster gets ready to leave. As soon as he leaves his fasting lodge, he starts to run. The fast runner gets after him and soon he catches him. Then they all ask the faster what spirit had blessed him. After that they give him a little song, and then he tells them by whom he had been blessed. By a very thin man (a *pagāk* spirit) he had been blessed.¹

FASTING EXPERIENCE (E).²

When a child was ten years of age, it generally started to fast. For a few days, sometimes a week, it was given nothing to eat except a little for supper. This was only preliminary to the real

¹*Pagāk* are thin airy spirits who formerly inhabited this earth, but who became so attenuated that they ascended into the air, where they still live, flying around and making peculiar sounds. It was formerly believed that if any one heard them he would die.

²This is a generalized account.

fasting, which began after that. After the child has fasted for a few days, the parents or grandparents build a little wigwam in a lonely spot of the woods. In this wigwam the faster then stays and sleeps. He is not allowed to eat or take even a drop of water. Generally he keeps a small piece of lead in his mouth and swallows the saliva that gathers. Every morning the parents or grandparents visit the person who is fasting, and inquire about his dreams, and if the faster dreams that he has been in trouble, lost in the woods, or eaten up by some wild animal, then he is taken home and given something to eat for a few days, after which he must start his fast again. His first experience is regarded as bad. Thus it continues for some time. The faster generally does not get his dream until the sixth to the tenth night. Sometimes a dream obtained even then is regarded as of bad omen, and the faster must start again. He is encouraged to have patience and wait until the right spirit comes. Sometimes this takes two to three months. The dream that is to benefit him generally comes in the following form. The faster, in his dream, finds himself in great trouble or, at times, he believes he is killed, and some animal comes to his rescue. This animal, he believes, will come to his rescue in similar situations throughout his life.

DISCUSSION.

We will discuss first the contents of the preceding experiences and then the relation of the fasting experience to the faster, on the one hand, and to his cultural environment, on the other, as it is embodied especially in the person of his parents and grandparents.

Even a cursory perusal of the experiences shows that, as one would have been led to expect, all are cast in a definite mould. An animal appears to the faster in a dream, and promising him certain blessings, leads him far away to some place where he meets the one who is actually to bless him. He is then led back to his little fasting-lodge and told to watch carefully the disappearing figure of the one who has come to him. It is only when the "person" is about to pass out of sight that he takes

upon himself the shape of the animal itself. This is the formula that appears over and over again, in all these dream-experiences, and is unquestionably transmitted from one generation to another. How this is transmitted would be an interesting thing to determine, but in the present state of our knowledge, I am afraid all that can be done is to offer a few hypothetical explanations. It is this that we shall in the main attempt to do.

What opportunity does a boy of say eleven years or thereabouts have of learning this dream-experience formula? That he would have the slightest opportunity of himself hearing an older person recount his dream-experience is quite unlikely, for it seems in olden times to have been customary to recount it only on one's sick bed and then to an older person. There is thus left only one means whereby he could obtain the desired information and that is through the system of instruction to which it was customary to subject all children from the age of five or six to the age of puberty and which consisted almost exclusively in directions concerning the actions necessary to take in order to ensure a happy and successful life. One of the most insistent prayers in this instruction is that without a guardian-spirit (manito) no individual could possibly surmount the crises in his life. But the main question to decide is, does the youth in this instruction obtain any detailed information about the dream-experience formula itself? I believe he does not. All that he is taught is to expect a dream-experience. The main object, I should say, is to obtain the religious thrill; the form that it assumes may be vague except for the outstanding fact that a manito has appeared to him. How then are we to account for the stability of the formal element? This, I believe, may be accounted for by two facts, first, that a minute control is exercised by the parents or grandparents, as the case may be, over the faster, and secondly, that the form in which a dream-experience is told does not represent that of the boy of eleven but that of a mature man. It is this latter fact, that we never obtain the experience of the youth, immediately after his fasting, that makes the question of the exact mechanism of transmission so difficult.

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Let us return now to the nature of the control exercised by the parents over the faster. This takes two forms, a negative and a positive one. It sees to it first, that the youth observes the fast and the restrictions imposed on him during the fast, and secondly, that only certain blessings be accepted. Now if we knew exactly in what this latter positive control consisted, we would know likewise what part the individual faster and the controlling agency, the father, etc., plays. Judging from the fact that we learn from one of the experiences that the faster is directed to accept only that spirit who comes to him "with a great gust of wind," we might argue that if the spirit by whom he is to be blessed is thus limited, other details might be equally dependent upon the suggestions of those who are in control. It might, of course, be said that owing to the extreme suggestibility of a child under the conditions imposed at the time of fasting, many details might be accounted for as due to this suggestibility. This is, of course, quite true, and this is probably responsible for many of the details that distinguish one experience from another, but it has no relation at all to the dream-experience formula, for the significant fact here is that the formula is always the same. However, even if we were to credit the controlling agency with a great influence in shaping the formal aspect of the experience, this must not be overrated, for that would be practically saying that all the formal elements were given at the beginning and I hardly believe there is any evidence for this.

We thus come face to face again with the central problem in the transmission of the dream-experience formula. Did the youth obtain the entire formula during his fast, or only part of it, or indeed any of it at all? And this brings us back to the question, did the youth obtain it? As I have stated before, we do not know what the form of the dream-experience, at the time of the experience itself, is, for no youth has ever told us. However, I believe that we may safely assume that from the point of view of formalistic expression, the dream-experience as known to the mature man was different from that known to the youth. Considering the age of the boy while fasting and the nature of the instruction he received, I believe that it is justifiable to assume that the main element in the dream-experience was

the religious "thrill," and that its setting was vague. It is not at all my purpose to separate the "thrill" from the setting of associations that have always clung to it in different cultural areas, but I claim that at the time of the thrill and perhaps for a considerable time afterwards in the life of the individual, these associated elements are vague and ill-defined and that they only then become clearly differentiated when the cultural environment exerts its greater influence upon the individual.

Now if we look at the dream-experience as a formal unit, we will notice that it contains a number of folkloristic elements, such as, for instance, the dreaming of a snake as an ill omen, the deceiving promises of the chickadee, etc. At the same time, the manner of obtaining the blessing, the visit to the home of the manito, etc., are all themes characteristically developed in the mythology of the people. Both these elements, folklore and mythology, begin to exercise their influence on the individual after the age of puberty. If, in addition, we allow for the increasing knowledge of the details of the dream-experience that in maturer years one is quite likely to obtain, all the conditions for the fixity of the dream-experience formula seem to be given.

Summing up, we might say that the evidence at hand seems to warrant the suggestion that a boy approaches the ordeal of fasting with definite suggestions from those who are exercising control over him at that time; that he himself is probably most intent upon the religious experience he is obtaining, and that although this religious thrill is necessarily associated with suggestions from others and from himself, these latter play a secondary part; that, finally, what I have called the dream experience formula probably does not exist at the time of fasting in any clearly defined form, but it probably represents the increasing influence of the cultural environment, and the knowledge of those details of the fast that he learns from the generation of his parents and grandparents, as he grows older.

The first number of the Museum Bulletin was entitled, *Victoria Memorial Museum Bulletin Number 1*.

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